

THE MINDFULNESS BOOK

PRACTICAL WAYS TO LEAD A MORE MINDFUL LIFE

INTRODUCTION

The faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention over and over again is the very root of judgment, character and will. . . . An education which should improve this faculty would be the education par excellence.

William James, *Principles of Psychology*, 1890

Near the turn of the 20th century, the celebrated Harvard professor and my favorite psychologist, William James, made a startling observation. He noticed that the ability to focus our minds by bringing our attention back to the present moment was the indispensable skill that enabled people to take control of their lives and achieve their potential.

Okay, hardly a discovery worthy of a Nobel Prize. And you don't need to be an air-traffic controller to know that some activities just need absolute presence of mind to lead to better outcomes. But more than a century later, that simple observation has had a profoundly positive impact on the lives of millions of people.

According to James, the ability to bring your attention back to the present moment repeatedly leads to “better judgment, character and willpower”. And, he cautions, if you lack this ability, then you cannot say you are the “master of yourself”. He went on to insist that the best education would be one that helps to improve this ability.

Now that's something we can all agree on. Think how often during the day you find yourself tired, stressed and irritable, your only refuge being momentary daydreaming about the past or future. Anxious thoughts pinball in your head, making it near impossible to power down and relax. For many people, this condition ramps up at the end of the day when they finally find themselves alone with their moods. Perhaps it was Pascal, the French mathematician and philosopher, who understood this dilemma better than anyone when he observed: “All of man's miseries stem from his inability to sit alone in a room.”

Although James was a genuine optimist, he was also honest enough to admit that, “It is easier to define this ideal than to give practical instructions for bringing it about.”¹ What he noticed was how difficult it is to simply control what we pay attention to. Our feelings and thoughts literally seem to have “a mind of their own”.

We've all had the experience of reading a book, for example, and getting to the bottom of the page before realizing we have no idea what we just read. We were actually thinking about something else entirely, while continuing to read the words on the page. Our minds are easily distracted by memories and daydreams, not to mention the persistent “to-do” list.

As frustrating as this can be at times, the more serious challenges come from the emotional turmoil in our lives caused by the unwelcome thoughts and emotions that create so much of our suffering. At any given moment, our peace of mind can be easily disturbed as we find ourselves reliving a hurtful memory or getting caught up in worry and anxiety about the future. And even when we are able to focus on the present moment clearly, we can find ourselves

reacting strongly to minor irritations or disagreements with those we care about. We are easily demoralized by our circumstances or increasingly fatigued by relentless overwork.

If any of this feels like your reality, you're not alone. In a revealing study published in the November 12, 2010 issue of *Science* magazine, psychologists at Harvard University used smartphones to collect data from more than 2,000 people who were asked to report what they were doing, thinking and feeling throughout the day.

The data revealed that on any given day, while performing a range of activities, our minds are wandering about 47% of the time. And, perhaps of more concern, the study revealed that we are unhappiest when our minds are wandering, compared to when they are focused on what we're actually doing. The study's title says it all: 'A Wandering Mind Is an Unhappy Mind.' The researchers concluded: "A human mind is a wandering mind, and a wandering mind is an unhappy mind. The ability to think about what is not happening is a cognitive achievement that comes at an emotional cost."

For many of us, the personal emotional cost is tied to negative mood, psychological stress, rigid obsessional thoughts, worry, unhappiness and exhaustion.

It appears that William James was certainly ahead of his time, but he could never have imagined how his simple observation would lead ultimately to the discovery of mindfulness – one of the great scientific breakthroughs of the 21st century for dealing with these problems effectively. Nor could he have possibly known that the practical instructions for developing mindfulness were already more than 2,500 years old.

THE MINDFUL REVOLUTION

In recent years, there has been an explosion of interest in mindfulness, with widespread media coverage. In 2014, *Time* magazine introduced the year by declaring that the "Mindfulness Revolution" was here and subsequently devoted not one, but two covers to it. It sometimes seems impossible to open a magazine or a newspaper without being lectured about the stress-reducing benefits of mindfulness.

In addition to mindfulness entering the mainstream, there has been a huge increase in academic research on the subject, with more than 500 peer-reviewed scientific journal papers now being published every year.

So what exactly is mindfulness? Mindfulness is the skill of paying close attention to what's happening in the present moment in the mind, body and external environment, non-judgmentally and with an attitude of curiosity and openness. I say "skill" because the ability to do this can be developed and improved over time. In other words, you can get better at it!

I have a theory that the idea of mindfulness appeals to us because it's something that we intuitively recognize in our own experience. Whether we know it or not, we already practise it in one form or another: when we're absorbed in a hobby or sport, caring for a distressed child, or focused like a laser on solving an immediate problem at work. Rather than operating on automatic pilot, we are fully attentive to what is happening in the present moment.

The Mindfulness Book returns to the original core ideas of this 2,500-year-old practice and offers you a practical interpretation in the light of contemporary psychology's best insights about how it works.

If achieving a more peaceful and focused mind is important to you, then this book offers you a simple, time-tested path.

OVERVIEW

There's so much more to mindfulness than simply being focused on the demands of the situation right in front of us. The aim of *The Mindfulness Book* is to provide you with an easily accessible and concise guidebook for exploring and applying mindfulness to your life.

PART ONE: MINDFULNESS – EASTERN AND WESTERN SCIENCE

Part one lays the foundation by describing the essential building blocks of mindfulness: what it is, how it works and, most importantly, what it delivers. Sometimes people get confused between the terms “mindfulness” and “meditation”. Essentially, meditation can be thought of as the mental training ground for developing greater mindfulness. And although a relatively simple practice, part one covers the necessary steps for putting meditation into practice so you can experience the immediate benefits. Although it's important to understand the theory behind mindfulness and meditation, nothing beats practice. I will guide you through a series of short practices so you can experience for yourself how mindfulness works.

Although the original insight that mindfulness would improve judgment, character and the quality of decision-making was made by William James, a leading philosopher and psychologist in the 19th century, the scientific data supporting the benefits of mindfulness continues to grow. In this section we will look at a representative

sample of compelling scientific studies, which confirm that mindfulness and meditation are also effective in reducing a long list of stress-related diseases, enhancing the capacity of the mind to focus and sustain attention, and in cultivating a more peaceful mind and general sense of wellbeing.

PART TWO – THE PSYCHOLOGY OF MINDFULNESS

In Part One you will have begun to practise the basic skills of mindfulness that help you create psychological space for establishing a more peaceful mind. In many ways, the goals of mindfulness overlap with the objectives of cognitive psychology, and in this section we explore the core ideas of mindfulness and their relationship to cognitive psychology. In particular, we examine practical psychological strategies for using mindfulness to develop greater self-awareness and conscious control over both your state of mind and behavior.

If you've applied the lessons described in part one, you've begun to practise mindfulness, noticing your breathing, and noticing the thoughts and feelings that make up your "Self". This now raises a very interesting question: What is this part of you that does all the noticing?

In the classic tradition, when we are training the mental ability known as mindfulness, it is just as important to develop a second skill referred to as introspection. Introspection is your ability to observe your mindfulness practice – "Am I practising correctly or not?" It's a kind of quality control monitor for the entire process. Developing this skill enables you to accelerate and advance your mindfulness practice.

One of the central benefits of mindfulness is that it takes you off autopilot and opens you up to greater awareness of your experiences. By developing the ability to live more consciously in the present moment, you experience the "power of now", which means greater peace of mind, clarity, and a mind less reactive and more awake to what's going on.

By learning how to reduce the struggle with both the pleasant and unpleasant aspects of our lives, we are able to approach the whole of life with a greater lightness of being. So in part two we also ask a big question: "Is the life you are living the life you *want* to be living right now?"

Although mindfulness emphasizes approaching your personal experience non-judgmentally, this does not mean unintelligently. In fact, mindfulness and introspection are expressions of your intelligence because they guide you in becoming wiser and more discerning about where and how you direct your attention and how you behave, according to your values.

PART THREE – FOUR APPLICATIONS OF MINDFULNESS

Part of the broad appeal of mindfulness to many people is its proven effectiveness in reducing stress. This, however, is an altogether far too limited view of the potential value of mindfulness. In Part Three, we explore four powerful applications of mindfulness based on the original tradition.

Mindfulness practice almost always begins by directing our attention to the body and our immediate experience of the physical

environment. Once we understand the close working relationship between the body and mind, we learn to interrupt the cause-and-effect relationship between our thoughts, feelings and our actions. Instead, we discover an increased ability to focus our mind constructively and greater power to *respond* rather than *react* to our circumstances. It is this core ability that actually forms the basis of emotional intelligence.

PART FOUR – LIVING MINDFULLY

Now that we have a better understanding of what mindfulness is and how to cultivate it, we are ready to apply its principles to affect the way we manage a range of situations in our lives. Part Four considers the challenges of living mindfully. As I mentioned earlier, part of the broad appeal of mindfulness is its effectiveness as an approach to stress management. In this section, we consider the mechanism driving the stress reaction and how a specific mindfulness technique can be used to soothe the body and calm the mind quickly. Of course, many people experience stress at work, so in this section we also consider how to apply mindfulness to a range of challenging demands in the workplace to improve performance and productivity.

The great thing about mindfulness as a skill is that it's the ultimate mobile technology. You can apply mindfulness anywhere at anytime, but it helps to have a strategy for getting the most out of your practice. So in this section we also review tips and strategies for systematically applying mindfulness and building a sustainable mindfulness practice.

Finally, why do some people achieve their potential, while most feel trapped or forced to live a life constrained by self-imposed limitations? In this final section, we apply mindfulness to the creative process to generate the conditions for a high-performing mind and for creating the life you want.

Whatever your goal, creating a more peaceful and focused mind, enjoying greater wellbeing, establishing more meaningful relationships, fulfilling your career ambitions or creating a more balanced lifestyle, *The Mindfulness Book* provides you with time-proven insights and practical strategies for living a more peaceful, productive and creative life.

BUILDING A MINDFULNESS PRACTICE

To help you develop your mindfulness practice, chapters conclude with practical takeaways in a section called '*The Practice*.' These sections provide you with mindfulness scripts or additional tips to enhance your mindfulness training. If you prefer to follow guided mindfulness sessions, you can download a range of audio files associated with each chapter from the website, www.themindfulnessbook.co.uk

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